DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 106 877 CS 202 088

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TITLE Writing Poetry: Children Can Do It!
PUB DATE Apr 75
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Conference on the Language Arts in the Elementary School (7th, Boston, Massachusetts, April 11-13, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Child Language; Composition (Literary); *Creative Writing; *Educational Objectives; Elementary Education; Language Development; *Poetry; *Teaching Techniques; Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

The starting point for teaching children to write poetry is allowing them to develop experiences and language to describe them. Another way of teaching or stimulating children to write poetry is to provide them with a rich and varied background of poetry by reading a wide range of poems to them. Poetry should become an integral part of talk and response in the classroom. Children need to know that poetry is a way of responding to something very real in their lives. Another way of helping children experiment with words and get started with poetic expression is by not imposing adult standards on children's writing. A final way of helping children grow in their ability to express themselves through poetry is by introducing various poetic forms for them to use. Children's poetry should indicate an awareness of an experience, sincerity of feeling, a choice of appropriate and natural language, and the creation of a response to the idea in the reader. Several poems written by children are quoted as examples demonstrating these qualities. (TS)

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WRITING POETRY: CHILDREN CAN DO IT!

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Children in the elementary schools are not mature enough for formal experiences in communicating their ideas. They need time to explore themselves and time to explore various ways of expressing their thoughts. This stage of exploration involves a considerable amount of "messing around" with the varied forms or means of communication.

When children paint, we do not give them a brush and paint and paper and expect a polished painting. Instead, children go through a period where they experiment with colors, textures, and materials. They have to find out what happens when you use a drippy brush or a dry one, which kinds of paint cover up the color below and which allow the colors below to show through, what happens when you mix various combinations of colors together, and what effects come from painting on dry paper contrasted with wet paper. They must experiment around to find out how to make objects look solid and round instead of flat, how to suggest motion, and how to give the illusion of depth. It is only after this rather long period of experimenting with paints and papers that they can begin to express their ideas so that others can grasp what they are saying through their picture. This same process applies to composing -- to writing a poem.

Children need to have a wealth or richness of experiences as base for writing. They need to play with words and with sounds and images. They must experiment with many kinds of poetic forms. They must hear a wide

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variety of poetry and absorb the way a poet uses various devices to express ideas. Children in elementary grades are not able developmentally to learn from abstract sources: from reading about poetry or from hearing their teacher talk about how to write it. Children have to experiment with language themselves. They must internalize in their own way how to use words to express ideas. They have to go through a period of "messing about" with words and forms.

This does not mean that the teacher is not involved in the process of writing poetry. Teachers are an essential part of the information and material from which the children build their own poetic expression. They are also a continuing source of stimulation and response to the writer. Unfortunately, teachers often know little about what to read to their students or how to respond to children's first attempts at writing. The Rosens[1] point out that many more children than we realize possess the quality of using language freshly, and that adaptability and flexibility is part of their thinking. They add that young children do not have set patterns of thought, of expectation, or of predictability. Teachers should capitalize on this ability of children to use language in spontaneous ways and avoid channeling children into their own expectations.

Many kinds of poetry being recommended for children as a writing experience seem to be quite inappropriate. They call for more that a child of elementary school age is capable of producing. An example of this is the Japanese haiku. On the surface haiku appear to be quite simple -- no rhyme and only seventeen syllables arranged in a 5-7-5 pattern. That's a rather superficial or oversimplified description, however. Haiku are highly condensed metaphorical comments on life. Children have a great deal

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[1]Connie and Harold Rosen, The Language of Primary School Children, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Education), 1973, p. 91.

of difficulty dealing with metaphorical language in even rather simple forms. How can we possibly expect a seven or ten year old to make a metaphorical comment on life in seventeen syllables? Another form of poetry often suggested for children is the limerick. Certainly children enjoy listening to limericks; they are funny and the rhythm and rhyme are appealing. Consider for a moment, though, what is actually involved in writing a limerick. There is a specific meter to deal with as well as a particular rhyme scheme. Rhyming is difficult for children, and we can see evidence of this in the distorted language used in rhymed poetry written by children. It is difficult because it confines the writer to working within a pattern. In order to produce the rhyme pattern, they often alter English sentence patterns or produce unmeaningful lines. We need to distinguish between what children enjoy hearing and why, and what they are capable of writing.

Terry studied children's interests and preferences in listening to poetry.[2] She analyzed fourth, fifth and sixth graders' responses to over one hundred poems and found the following elements in the poems liked and disliked by the children in this national survey.

Liked	Disliked
humorous poems	sentimental or serious poems
rhythm, rhyme, sound	imagery and figurative language
familiar experiences, animals	unfamiliar experiences
contemporary poems	traditional poems
familiar poems	unfamiliar poems
narrative poetry	free verse
limericks	haiku

There appear to be several important implications from Terry's study that relate to children's writing poetry. One of the things that children liked to hear was familiar poetry. Unfortunately, this same study revealed that three-fourths of the teachers read poetry to their classes only

[2]Ann Terry, Children's Poetry Preferences: A National Survey of Upper Elementary Grades, (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE), 1974.

"occasionally" or "once a month". Writing poetry was not a common practice either in these classrooms as over ninety percent of the teachers in the study had their children write poetry only "occasionally" or "very seldom".

Two other studies just over forty years apart also indicate that children's interests in poetry are affected by what the teacher reads to them. Coast[3] in 1928 examined the poems that a group of teachers most enjoyed teaching and the poems that children in these classrooms preferred. She concluded that the poems which teachers prefer are the ones most frequently chosen by children. Then in 1969 Tom[4] conducted a survey to determine what poems were read to children in fourth through sixth grades. Almost six hundred questionnaires from five states across the country showed that the majority of the forty-one most popular poems were in narrative form, and that all but four of them were written before 1928. The poems most often read by teachers were: "Paul Revere's Ride", "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening", "A Visit from St. Nicholas", "Casey at the Bat", "Little Orphan Annie", "Fog", "The Village Blacksmith", "My Shadow", and "Hiawatha". Considering the poetic qualities Terry found that children liked, there appears to be little fit between what teachers read and what children like.

The starting point of poetry is developing experiences and language to describe them. Another part of teaching or stimulating children to write poetry is to provide them with a rich and varied background of poetry by reading a wide range of poems to them. The poems in the reading books are not enough. Anthologies will certainly provide some material, but these often contain older, traditional poems and only rhymed, metered poetry. Teachers should supplement these sources with modern books of poetry for children or selections

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[3]Alice B. Coast, "Children's Choices in Poetry as Affected by Teachers' Choices," Elementary English Review, V (May, 1928), p. 145.

[4]Chow Loy Tom, "What Teachers Read to Pupils in the Middle Grades," Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, The Ohio State University,(1969), p. 194.

from such books. Poetry should never be just 'the words we copy from the board for handwriting practice.' Poetry should become an integral part of talk and response in the classroom. If teachers would keep a file box with copies of poems they want to introduce to their class nearby, they can easily find the one about dandelions the very same day these bloom outside. A sharing time report of fixing breakfast can trigger the teacher's reading "Mummy Slept Late and Daddy Fixed Breakfast." Children need to know that poetry is a way of responding to something very real in their lives.

Another part of helping children "mess around" with words and get started with poetic expression is by not imposing adult standards on children's writing. Too often teachers themselves have not written poetry, and they may not even really enjoy reading it. They have had little experience with poetry in their own lives, and so they're reluctant about doing much with poetry in the classroom. This is particularly difficult when they come to respond to children's writing. Perhaps the following criteria or guidelines will be helpful. Children's poetry should indicate: (1) An awareness of an experience, (2) Sincerity of feeling, (3) A choice of appropriate and natural language, and (4) The creation of a response to the idea in the reader. Responding to children by telling them what you particularly liked in their poem and having other children hear or read their poems and tell what they liked stimulates both an interest in writing poetry and growth in writing it more than any grading or evaluating by a teacher will do.

The third part of helping children grow in their ability to express themselves through poetry is in the introduction of various poetic forms to use. Certainly the first writing by children should be very free -- something we might call word pictures. An example of this is from a first grader who wrote:

THE CLOCK

The clock tells time
Bedtime
Suppertime
Playtime
The best time of all.

The Rosens[5] give several other examples from six and seven year olds.

Alison wrote:

The early morning
Sun rises
up
up
up
rising until it is
up in the sky
then it gets very
hot all it is really
is a ball of fire

A group of six to nine year old children composed together the following:

Snow

Snow flutters quietly
Covering the ground like white butterflies
We walk through the cold crunchiness
Leaving our footmarks
With the small spiky footprints of birds.

This kind of picture writing as it develops becomes the kind of free verse written by Christina, a seventh grader.

The sky never ends
up and up forever high
reaching for the top

Darkness spreads like ink
Till the stars shyly peep through
And extend their light

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[5]Rosen & Rosen, op. cit., p. 90 and p. 100.

The morning comes thin
and pinkish paint soaks the sky
The sun wakes us up

A kind of poetry that may appeal to children throughout the elementary grades and that fits in with this kind of 'picture writing' is concrete poetry. In concrete poetry the words either outline a visual picture of the topic or form a more solid picture of it. Mark's poem about birds is a fine example of concrete poetry.

B
I
R
D
S
Birds fly high, birds fly low
Birds fly slow, birds fly fast
B
I F
R L
D Y
S
F
R
E
E

Several of the invented forms of poetry that don't depend upon rhyme give children some structure within which to compose poetry. After seeing several examples of each kind, they can compose their own poems in these forms without knowing the technical names of parts of speech. An easy form is the cinquain. This is a five line poem: line 1 -- the name of something or someone, line 2 -- two describing words, line 3 -- three -ing words like running or shaking, line 4 -- a four word comment, and line 5 -- a repetition or synonym for line one. Betsy's cinquain is about a candle.

Candle,
Bright, light
Glowing, shining, sparkling
Such a pretty sight
Fire.

Another invented form which is a bit more difficult is the diamante, so called because of its diamond-like shape. The first three lines follow the cinquain pattern. Line four has four nouns which start to form opposites between the second and third. Then line five is like line three, line six is like line two, and the seventh line is a noun which is the opposite of line one. Shay has taken a few liberties with the fourth line, but his poem certainly makes a poetic comment.

Flag
Stars, Stripes
Waving, flopping, symbolizing
Expressing leadership -- Battle torn
Declining, splitting, weakening
Fight, Die
War

Children may also enjoy making up their own invented forms for poems. After working with some color poems, a group of children working with me came up with the following format. Lines one, four, and seven are a noun; lines two and five are two colors; and lines three and six are three -ing words or participles.

The Ocean

Waves
blue and silver
flashing, sparkling, pirouetting
Storm
grey and charcoal
whipping, lashing, breaking
Release

Our other example of this form is Georgia through and through.

Georgia

Pines
green and brown
waving, rustling, murmuring
Earth
orange and red
warming, feeding, encouraging
Growth

When you begin to introduce writing rhymed poetry, you should begin with very simple forms. One that has had special appeal and, I think, considerable success is Terse Verse. These poems consist simply of two rhymed words with a rather long explanatory title. Start with the pair of rhymed words and then add the title to it. Children throughout the elementary and middle school or junior high school have had fun and success with terse verse. Amber wrote:

What the Soldier Said to the King

Fire
Sire!

Darren was introduced to terse verse near Christmas and came up with the following:

What Did the Reindeer Say to Santa Claus

Weird
Beard.

Another form of rhymed poetry which children have enjoyed is the clerihew. Clerihews are four line poems. Line one is a name and rhymes with line 2, and then lines 3 and 4 rhyme. This is considerably more difficult than terse verse, however; and when it is introduced to children who have had little experience with poetry, it too often results in meaningless lines or strange word order. In the attempt to meet the rhyme scheme, the children alter their normal language patterns or come up with nonsense verse.